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ABSTRACT

While contemporary communication perspectives often make a distinction between reality and the televised presentation of reality, viewers may find this distinction difficult to maintain. Television is imbued with perceived objectivity. The use of recreations in popular television programming requires a reconceptualization of how viewers perceive reality. Televised recreations potentially challenge credibility as they provide a point at which the believability of the narrative could be open to question. To study the effects of recreations on credibility, groups of 12 and 17 students (all were white) in an undergraduate communication class at a small northwestern university were asked to view a 12-minute portion of the reality-based television program "Rescue 911." Some students noted frustration in trying to distinguish actual events and recreated segments. Most enjoyed the perceived realism of the program, which seemed to contribute to acceptance of the story's social themes (for example, that a black man was portrayed as a criminal and that law enforcement reflected a racist discourse.) The disparity between fact and fiction in dramatic recreations may influence believability without undermining authenticity. Lacking recourse to experiences which discredit dramatic recreations, audiences will continue to rely on television as a source of information about other social groups. (SG)

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RESCUING REALITY: VIEWER INTERPRETATION OF TELEVISION RECREATIONS

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RESCUING REALITY: VIEWER INTERPRETATION OF TELEVISION RECREATIONS

We invest in television, our modern storyteller, the responsibilities of educating, informing, and entertaining us. These functions traditionally have been represented separately in programming, with the bulk of airtime devoted to shows that entertain and inform. Although the narrative conventions used in television overlap between program types, the content characterizing entertainment and information programming functions has been broadly distinguished as either fictional or non-fictional.

More recently, distinctions between how television frames "fact" and how it frames fiction have become blurred. Correspondingly, the distinctions between the entertainment and information functions of television are eroding. Network news may air a recreation when it cannot represent an actual event; whereas news once presented a fact within the frame of "objective reality," it now increasingly frames fact via fiction. In entertainment, the melodrama moves toward docudrama with recreations of real-life events. In the use of the dramatic recreation, television has discovered a way of telling that neither conforms wholly to the conventional expectations of informational formats nor wholly to those of entertainment formats. This amorphous blending of fact and fantasy characterizes a generation of popular, "reality," or "reality-based" programming. Representative of this emerging genre

are shows such as America's Most Wanted, Crime Stoppers, and Rescue 911, which are given wide visibility on traditional network affiliates and on local stations affiliated with Fox Television.

This paper has two goals. First, we outline the relationship between the nature of reality and the use of recreations in narrative constructions of reality. Second, we begin to explore the underlying dimensions of audience interpretation regarding reality-based programming. Specifically, we are concerned with how viewers assign meaning to social themes portrayed through the use of dramatic recreations.

Dramatic Recreation and Perceived Reality

Contemporary communication perspectives often make a distinction between reality "out there" and the televised presentation of it. Viewers, however, may find this distinction difficult to maintain. Television appeals to a multiplicity of human sense and is imbued with perceived objectivity, understood here as the perceptual unification of televised images and sounds and the material objects they signify. Perceived objectivity authenticates televised images, and the mandate to record and represent reality traditionally has been borne by news and public affairs programming and, to a lesser extent, documentaries. Television's perceived truth-value also has implications for dramatic content; television drama links our lives to fictional lives, and the credibility of its public representations can validate our private fantasies. The force of our indentification with characters developed in the dramatic story is strengthened

by the grounding of the recreation in reality.

The use of recreations in popular television programming requires us to reconceptualize how we as viewers perceive reality. The recreation spotlights the tension between the varying narrative conventions that traditionally have guided presentations of information and entertainment. For example, the grammar of the recreation is partly constructed of fictional codes inscribed by cinematographic camera shots (i.e., close-ups, dissolves, and fades), yet viewers make sense of the recreation within the syntax provided by the recreation's reference to a real-life occurrence.

Reality-based programs further complicate a viewer's delineation of reality by placing the recreation within a complex context of story frames. Some reality-based programs use actors to recreate one scene from an incident, but may use persons originally involved in the incident to recreate another scene, thus merging real-life agent with dramatic character. Actual video or film footage of an event may be accompanied by dubbed audio, or vice versa. Reenactments also may contain snippets of actual visuals. This interplay between the dramatic codes and their real-life referents creates a slippery context for viewer determination of reality, for the points at which dramatization and perceived objectivity depart in the recreation provide sites of ambiguity for the viewer.

Recreations and Viewer Interpretation

Different conceptions of how viewers perceive reality yield competing theories about how perception translates into

interpretations of social relations. A pluralistic perspective holds that television potentially may reflect a diverse American society constituted by equitable relations among social groups. A critical perspective assumes that television distorts reality, privileging mainstream orientations and deflecting attention away from other orientations; thus, television helps both to establish and to enforce hegemonic social control by providing symbolic reaffirmation of normalcy. Given this perspective, the televised text preempts the viewer's critical assessment and provides a "common sense" version of reality.

Recreations potentially challenge the closure of credibility; that is, recreations are a point at which the believability of the narrative could be open to question. Ambiguities in the narrative construction of reality created by the use of recreations reveal strategic sites for transformations in meaning: At moments where realism is disrupted -- those instances which viewers perceive a distinction between actual footage and dramatization -- the text might disturb the "naturalized" interpretive link to mainstream values and assumptions about social relations.

To explore these potential dimensions of viewer interpretation, we collected and analyzed audience responses from focus-group interviews conducted after the groups viewed a short reality-based episode that included dramatic recreations. Our research questions fall into several areas of response: Which narrative elements did our respondents choose either to include or exclude from their reconstructions of the episode? How did our respondents negotiate realism in the segment, and at which points did they perceive the

narrative to be more or less believable? And, what specific meanings did respondents assign to the episode's portrayals of two social themes: race relations and crime, and the use of technology in combating crime?

Sample and Method

A 12-minute episode of the reality-based television program Rescue 911 was taped off the air and replayed in focus groups composed of students in two undergraduate communication courses at a small, private university in the Northeast. Group discussion was structured by the researchers' general questions; the 90 minutes allotted each discussion, however, allowed time for follow-up questions and for participants to respond at length. Although participants, who numbered 17 in one group and 12 in the other, were encouraged to respond, a few chose not to involve themselves in the discussion. The respondents were white and of middle- and upper-middle-income family backgrounds. Sixteen respondents (55%) were women.

The text used to stimulate discussion recreates a house burglary in the Fort Worth, Texas suburbs, a neighbor's reporting of the crime by telephone to 911 personnel, and the capture of the perpetrator through the use of a police helicopter and infrared surveillance technology. Rescue 911 does not use actual footage in the recreation, but it is unclear whether the recreation is filmed at the original scene of the crime. The neighbor's phone-in tip involves both recreated and actual audio, with the caption "Actual Call" briefly appearing on the screen to indicate authenticity.

The 911 call and the burglary in progress overlap in the episode, such that the soundtrack reproduces the 911 call while the visuals recreate the break-in. As the telephone informant ends her call, the visual recreation shows the burglar entering the house through a window he shattered with a weed-trimmer.

The setting shifts to the police response to the 911 tip. Police officers recreate their original roles in the incident. These roles include the dispatcher, officers assigned to a helicopter patrol, and officers who chase the suspect through city streets on foot and in squad cars and who eventually tackle the suspect at a deserted intersection. The helicopter patrol is recreated, but actual videotape of the fleeing suspect provided by infrared surveillance is included, as is the actual audio communication between the airborne officers, the dispatcher, and officers on the ground. The videotape of the infrared images includes the brief caption, "Police Footage."

The recreations dramatize the episode chronologically and are intercut by videotaped interviews with officers, and the visual portion of the recreated chase is paired with the officers' audiotaped reconstructions. The episode is bracketed within the introductory and concluding comments of host William Shatner. The reconstructed narrative, then, derives credibility from the accounts offered by the white police officers who participated in the actual apprehension of the black male suspect, and the host's comments validate the authorities' motives and actions.

After viewing this episode, respondents were asked: 1) to reconstruct the story in as much detail as they could recall; 2) to

evaluate the believability of the recreations generally and of specific events recreated; 3) to specify why they judged a recreation, or part of a recreation, to be believable or not; 4) what they liked and disliked about this program, and whether they would be likely to watch this program; 5) whether they attributed any specific meanings to the events portrayed in the episode.

Audience Responses and Analysis of Interpretations

The respondents were in substantial agreement about what generally occurred in the episode, reconstructing the plot outlined above. Their versions of what happened differed on relatively minor points. Respondents, for example, disagreed about whether the woman who reported the burglary was cooking before she placed the 911 call from her kitchen. Several respondents expressed reservations about the believability of this woman because she "doesn't know who her neighbor is" and "the way she called was really weird, because she was so calm." Questions were also raised about the break-in scene; respondents had difficulty accepting the idea that the suspect would use a weed-eater, rather than a rock or some other object, to break the window.

Although respondents raised questions about the believability of some plot details, additional skepticism did not necessarily arise as a result of confusion caused by Rescue 911's weaving of reconstructions with actual audio and film clips. Viewers voiced a variety of beliefs about the extent to which events were fabricated; whereas one respondent claimed that "they faked most of it. You could tell from the way the scene was shot that it wasn't

real," another viewer said that "they (911) weren't there at first, but they got there later."

Several respondents mentioned their frustrations in trying to make distinctions between reality and reconstruction, as exemplified in comments such as: "It wasn't clear whether this is a dramatization or not," "I couldn't understand half of it. They cut between different parts of the story," and "They have real people playing themselves, and then actors playing the real people, and so you're all confused." Even the presence of William Shatner as narrator posed a potential dilemma for viewers; "That guy, Captain Kirk," only briefly mentioned the use of actors in the program, and since Shatner "is an actor, too," viewers "can't tell if he's just acting or presenting the story." But this confusion in identifying points of actuality in the reconstruction did not upset the overall credibility that viewers were willing to grant Rescue 911's version of the break-in; in fact, a few respondents commented that these reconstructions of events are more believable than standard, "objective" network newscast presentations of events.

The perceived realism of the recreations contributed to respondents' enjoyment of the episode, although one respondent noted that she liked the episode because it did not seem real enough to her: "It's attractive because it's oversensationalized. They dramatize it so much it's funny." Respondents also commented on specific content they found either enjoyable or unappealing. One viewer expressed interest in and enjoyment of the portrayal of infrared technology. Another respondent was bored by the nature of

the crime portrayed: "This is really rinkydink. . . . It's not as if someone were trying to kill someone." Some respondents indicated that, regardless of how credible they found the recreations to be, they enjoyed the suspenseful presentation of the episode as a whole.

Although respondents varied in their overall liking of recreations, they voiced general approval of and agreement with specific social concerns raised in the episode they viewed. First, respondents commented on the appropriateness of showing a black man as the suspect of a crime. "It's kinda typical. A suspicious, black man in the suburbs gets caught burglarizing homes. . . . They could have used a white suspect, but then it would be less believable." Of course, the crime recreated did ostensibly involve a black suspect; the point here is that such a crime is more believable for viewers because the burglar is black. Second, viewers identified the use of infrared sensors as making this apprehension of a criminal unique:

> The whole thing about showing a burglary is that they're trying to show how infrared can be used to catch criminals. That's interesting. So the burglary isn't important. They only mention it because they're trying to show how to solve the problem of catching criminals at night.

Rescue 911 successfully solves this problem for viewers; the "use of the infrared and helicopters adds excitement" to the reconstruction, and, although infra-red "isn't perfect" because "there were times when (the police) couldn't follow the criminal,"

viewers generally agreed that the technology was a valuable and necessary policing device.

Respondents' comments about the presentation of a black man as culprit and the use of infra-red sensors to catch him are revealing for what they omit as well as what they include. Rescue 911's presentation affirmed stereotypes of blacks not just as criminals, but also as poor, animalistic, and athletic. For instance, though police describe the suspect as wearing a muscle-shirt and shorts, 911 shows him first in a white, sleeveless shirt with loose dungarees and heavy, dark footgear resembling boots, and later portrays him in the same clothing but running barefoot as he is chased by police. All authorities in the episode are white, and one policeman grins sheepishly as he describes the athletic prowess of the suspect. Despite this apparent stereotyping, none of the respondents questioned the legitimacy or believability of Rescue 911's portrayal.

Hesitation about the desirability or usefulness of infrared sensors for routine police work was also absent from respondents' comments. Although a practical limitation of the device -- the fact that infrared follows "all sorts of things . . . that give off heat" -- was raised, viewers seemed unconcerned about potential abuses or violations of privacy made possible by the technology. Rather, respondents reacted favorably toward the device because "it gives the police a huge advantage over criminals." During the final stages of the focus group interviews, respondents were asked directly about potential problems with the use of infrared sensors, and though some viewers acknowledged that the Rescue 911 episode

resembled an advertisement for the device, even with prompting they did not choose to criticize this form of citizen surveillance.

Conclusion

The synthesis of information and entertainment in reality programming in the form of dramatic recreation presents a unique portrayal of reality, because recreations create ambiguous relationships between actual incidents and the reconstruction of them. Viewers recognize this ambiguity, as evidenced by their disagreements about whether Rescue 911 indicated the use of video and audio recreations. Some respondents correctly noted that Shatner, in his introduction to the story, tells viewers that Rescue 911 has reconstructed the incident "using actors and officers involved." The stress on the visual recreation of the event is important because many viewers did not recall seeing the captioned qualification used to differentiate between actual footage and visual recreation. This ambiguity partly explains the confusion among our respondents about which parts of the episode involved actual film footage. Whether this ambiguity allows viewers to construct substantively different interpretations of social relations as presented in the episode remains questionable.

The meanings that our respondents assigned to the episode varied somewhat with perceived realism. Those who questioned the plausibility of the informant, for example, tended to characterize the episode as a story about the effectiveness of infrared sensors in police work. Respondents who said they were more informed than entertained by the program tended to emphasize police surveillance

capabilities as the story's primary focus; those who said the episode was good drama tended not to talk about the relevance of technology in the police pursuit and capture of the suspect. Despite these differences, nearly all the respondents perceived the segment to be highly authentic, and these differences remained confined within the narrow parameters of meaning that would be given by a literal interpretation of Rescue 911's presentation of the incident.

The perceived authenticity of the segment might explain why our respondents did not challenge or critique the social themes portrayed in the segment. The depiction of the black suspect and the associations between race, criminals, and law enforcement made in the episode reveal a racist discourse, but few of our respondents could identify this racist discourse in any but the vaguest of terms. Few mentioned the segment's stereotyping of blacks and, to a lesser extent, police officers, and none, even with prompting, offered an alternative interpretation of race and crime in society. The representation of infrared surveillance in law enforcement was met by a similar lack of critical assessment.

In summary, the disparity between fact and fiction in dramatic recreations may influence believability without undermining authenticity. Although the segment used in this study provided awkward moments for the plausibility of specific details in the story told, the overall authenticity of the segment may have assured respondents that they witnessed a typical crime, committed by a typical criminal, and resolved competently, as usual, by the police. Further, the use of an atypical means of apprehending the

suspect may have heightened perceptions that the police are in control of crime and that increased police surveillance is desirable.

Viewers of reality programming recognize that it stands, as one respondent said, as "the median between situation comedies and hard news." As a standard tool of presentation in reality programming, dramatic recreations epitomize the juncture between entertainment and information; as such, recreations should provide points of contention for audience interpretations. But these findings suggest that the authenticity of the recreation can make the unreal seem real, thus discouraging alternative interpretations rather than encouraging them. Additionally, lacking recourse to experiences that discredit dramatic recreations, audiences will continue to rely on television to provide the stories by which they learn about and interpret the actions of various social groups.